

THE PSC COLD WEATHER RULE TO TAKE EFFECT NOVEMBER 1

Jefferson City (October 26, 1997)--The Missouri Public Service Commission's Cold Weather Rule, designed to help customers with heat-related utility bills, begins on November 1, 1998. The rule will remain in effect through March 31, 1999.

The Cold Weather Rule has been a part of the Commission's rules and regulations since 1977. Since its inception, the rule has helped over one million needy customers maintain heat-related service during the winter.

The Cold Weather Rule relates to any residential gas or electric service that is necessary for the proper function and operation of heating equipment. Electric or gas service provided by municipalities, electric cooperatives and propane delivered by truck are not covered by this rule.

The Cold Weather Rule allows customers to maintain service under certain payment terms, restricts deposits, ensures customers are given adequate notification of a proposed discontinuance, encourages customers who can't pay their utility bills to seek financial assistance through available sources, provides special provisions for the state's elderly and handicapped and **prohibits the disconnection of heat-related service when temperatures are predicted to fall below 30 degrees.**

The Cold Weather Rule contains provisions for those customers who can't pay their utility bill but want to maintain existing service. Under the rule that customer must: (1) contact the utility company and express an inability to pay the bill in full; (2) apply for energy assistance; (3) provide income information if requested; (4) make a minimum payment; and (5) enter into a payment agreement.

The Cold Weather Rule requires the utility to first offer a 12 month budget plan. If a customer states an inability to pay a budget plan amount, and that inability to pay is due to pre-existing arrears, the utility and customer may enter into an agreement which allows the payment of those arrears beyond 12 months. A customer may also request a payment agreement which allows payment of current bills, plus arrears, in fewer than 12 months. The utility is required to confirm all payment agreements in writing unless the extension granted the customer does not exceed two weeks.

(More)

The Cold Weather Rule also contains a temperature provision. A utility company cannot shut off service on a day when the National Weather Service has issued a local forecast between 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m., for the following 24 hours, predicting the temperature will drop **below 30 degrees**.

The Cold Weather Rule requires utility companies to provide certain types of notification prior to a discontinuance of service during the time the rule is in effect.

Prior to a discontinuance of service, the utility company must: (1) mail a notice to the customer **10 days** before the date it intends to shut off service; (2) attempt to contact the customer within 96 hours before the shut off; (3) attempt to contact the customer immediately preceding discontinuance; and (4) leave notice at the customer's premises at the time of the discontinuance. In all of these contacts, the utility company is required to explain the provisions of the rule, including the method of calculating the minimum required payment and state the availability of financial assistance from the Division of Family Services. The utility must also list other sources of financial assistance from any agency which notifies the utility company that they provide the assistance.

This rule contains special notification procedures prior to a discontinuance of service for the elderly and handicapped who have filled out a form provided by the utility company.

A utility company is required to contact those registered elderly and handicapped individuals prior to a discontinuance of service. This contact must initially include two or more phone call attempts and a mailing to both the customer and a social agency or other party listed on the individual's registration form. The utility company must also make a personal contact with the registered customer, or some family member at the premises above the age of 15, before a discontinuance of service. In all of these contacts, the utility company is required to inform the customer of the provisions of service under this rule as well as the availability of financial assistance from the Division of Family Services. The utility must also list other sources of financial assistance from any agency which notifies the utility company that they provide the assistance.

While utility companies are required to comply with the requirements of this rule, some companies go beyond what the Cold Weather Rule requires. Customers should contact their utility company to see what, if any, additional measures the company has taken to provide heat-related services to customers during the winter months.